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AUTHOR	Hansen, Kenneth H.
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ABSTRACT

This paper sets forth and clarifies state-level policy issues that are implicit in the recommendations for reform provided by recent major reports on the status of American education. For each report under consideration, four questions are posed: (1) Who is recommending what? (2) Does the recommendation make sense in a state's total program? (3) What are the influences (political, fiscal, other) operating for or against the adoption of this recommendation? and (4) What are the likely consequences of adopting this recommendation? The first part discusses recommendations in the report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education that raise fundamental policy questions, such as those calling for "five new basics" as well as higher academic standards, more time in school, and the upgrading of teacher status. The second part discusses the Twentieth Century Fund Task Force Report, which is primarily concerned with federal, rather than state, policy, but nevertheless has implications for the federal-state relationship in educational policy. The third report discussed, the College Board Educational Equality Project, is primarily concerned with standards for college entrance and thus raises the policy question of equitable resource allocation to accommodate the needs of all students, whether college-bound or not. Remaining reports that are discussed more briefly include the Education Commission of the States Task Force on Education, the Carnegie Corporation report "Education and Economic Progress," and Goodlad's "A Study of Schooling." (TE)

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THE REFORM OF AMERICAN EDUCATION: POLICY ISSUES FOR STATE EDUCATION AGENCIES

An Issues Analysis Paper

Discussion Draft

Prepared for the Chief State School Officers
of the Northwest and Pacific

Kenneth H. Hansen
Principal Author

Northwest Center for State Educational Policy Studies
Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory
300 S.W. Sixth Avenue
Portland, Oregon 97204

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THE REFORM OF AMERICAN EDUCATION:
POLICY ISSUES FOR STATE EDUCATION AGENCIES

It is becoming a commonplace observation to note that education is back on the national agenda as a matter of central importance to the well-being of our country. Nothing better illustrates the return of education to a center-stage position than the all-at-once flood of reports on the status of American education and proposals for its reform. The first of the major reports, that of the National Commission on Excellence in Education, has been followed by ones from the Education Commission of the States, the College Entrance Examination Board, the Twentieth Century Fund, the Carnegie Corporation, the National Association of Secondary School Principals, and the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, to name only a few of the most prominent of the studies.

The general role and responsibility of the state--and by implication, of the SEA--has received varying degrees of prominence in these reports, but little attention seems to have been given to the specific policy issues which are implicit in the recommendations for educational reform. This paper will attempt to set forth and clarify some of those policy issues. For example, what are the options for responding generally to this almost overwhelming abundance of reports? What kinds of analyses of these reports will give the SEAs the best basis for formulating action programs? What policy issues pose the most fundamental choices for SEAs?

GENERAL SEA RESPONSE

It has been very heartening to find that negativism or defensiveness in the response of professional educators to these reports, most all of which are sharply critical of American education, has not been a problem. Although legitimate questions have been raised about some aspects of each of the reports--the up-to-dateness of some of the statistics, the accuracy of some of the generalizations, the relevance of some of the criticisms to individual school districts and to specific states--there seems to be general agreement that most of the criticisms are valid and many of these suggestions for improvement are well worth considering. Perhaps it is not really surprising that the reports have been so generally well received. They have been prepared by groups, agencies, and organizations which are basically the friends of education, not its enemies. The committees have included persons of great credibility and stature; they have been generally well informed; they have avoided single-issue, dogmatic approaches; and the tone of the reports has been essentially positive and up-beat.

Therefore, it is not surprising that there has been no tendency on the part of SEAs either to ignore or to resist these reports, seeing them rather as a sincere effort to give direction to needed reform in American education at all levels. On the other hand, SEAs have successfully resisted the temptation to simply endorse or adopt the committee or commission suggestions <u>in toto</u>, even though that might seem a popular action to take, just to demonstrate that the agency is really in tune with the times.

The policy options for SEAs with respect to general reactions to the reports, therefore, seem to exclude the two extremes: do nothing or do everything. Rather, the SEA seems to have the opportunity to be quite selective--and eclectic--in deciding how to make the best use of these reports, and to capitalize on the forward-looking thrust that they have outlined for the reform of education. Specifically, the SEA's response may entail primarily a public reaffirmation of certain broad principles and general directions; it may require seeking legislation or instituting changes in certain regulatory procedures; or it may require reallocation of fiscal resources or redeployment of agency personnel--or any one of these actions in combination with the others.

In order to determine what the policy issues really are, and further to determine what policy options are available, and how to choose wisely among them, it may be helpful to suggest a kind of pattern or paradigm for analysis of this current wealth of education reform proposals.

This pattern for analysis could be made very detailed, if there were both the necessity and the time for a rigorous, scholarly approach; but since the task at hand is simply to make as much sense as possible out of this vast (and growing) body of reform proposals, it probably will be sufficient to pose just four questions regarding each of the reports which come under consideration:

1. Who is recommending what?
2. Does the recommendation make sense in our total program?
3. What are the forces (political, fiscal, other) operating for or against the adoption of this recommendation?
4. What are the likely consequences of adopting this recommendation?

Using these questions as a format for the analysis of the reform recommendations, it may be instructive to look at a few of the commission reports which have been most widely publicized in order to determine what policy issues are emerging for state education agencies as they grapple with the problems involved.

A. National Commission on Excellence in Education

This report--in common with many of the others--contains many suggestions for educational reform which are of a rather general nature: calling on society for clearer goals, greater vision, and renewed commitment to education--all convincingly set forth with vigor, even with passion. SEAs would presumably encounter no policy problems in agreeing with most of these statements. There are a few highly specific recommendations, however, which may raise some fundamental policy questions.

The content requirements for high school graduation, for example, are surely commendable: the "five new basics" of four years of English, three years each of mathematics, science, and social studies, and one-half year of computer science, with an additional two years of high-school-level foreign language for the college-bound. Good! But there are questions: Does this prescription jibe with what the state has thoughtfully adopted as its own goals and standards? Is it an appropriate intellectual fare for all students? Can it be fiscally supported, and is it politically saleable if it means lots of retentions and numerous non-graduates? Will the consequence be that--despite Commission intentions and protestations to the contrary--there will be insufficient attention given to the affective domain, to the arts, and to vocational education?

The Excellence Commission's recommendations concerning "standards and expectations" are, again, ones which would probably receive general approbation from SEAs. All of the contemporary "effective schooling" thrusts emphasize higher aspirations and expectations on the part of parents, of teachers, and of students--and rigorous standards to assure that these expectations are met. In getting down the specifics, however, some policy issues inevitably emerge.

For example, does the push for higher academic standards, as measured by standardized achievement tests, assure consonance with other educational goals adopted by the state? Again, what are the fiscal implications and political forces to be reckoned with if the imposition of these academic standards results in an excessively high failure rate? In terms of the current labor market, what--to put it most bluntly--is society going to do with those students who don't pass?

The Commission's recommendations in the area of "time" are not likely to raise many policy issues, for there is general agreement on the great importance of providing instruction in effective study and work skills, the necessity for more appropriate homework, better classroom management of time, more attention to academic learning time or time on task--policy on all of these matters has been fairly well set. The controversial policy issue here is, almost surely, likely to revolve around the extension of the school day and the school year. The political hassle and the fiscal costs may well preclude any immediate arrangements to add more net school time; better use of time and gradual addition of more time would seem to be moves having the most likely favorable consequences.

The Commission's recommendations regarding teaching are ones, with certain significant exceptions, which suggest the continuation of generally existing policies and, as such, require no particular

examination of policy isues. Strengthened teacher education programs, higher salaries, grants and loans to attract outstanding teacher candidates (especially in shortage areas)--these are fairly standard suggestions. The controversial--and hence policy-sensitive--recommendations, however, have great potential significance: an 11-month teacher contract; career ladders to distinguish various levels of teaching, and, most controversial of all, performance-based salary schedules.

Adoption of any of the last three suggestions by the SEA could very conceivably be entirely consistent with established agency policy in general, but each of them entails its own policy considerations of both fiscal and political nature. In this time of fiscal restraints, declining enrollment, and shrinking resources, any proposals for increasing teacher salaries, even if coupled with some form of "merit rating" (a term to be devoutly avoided!), will encounter sharp political opposition from a number of sources, and any type of performance-based salary schedule seems to insure automatic resistence from the organized teacher groups. This is not to suggest at all that these recommendations should be discarded; rather, the questions raised serve merely to illustrate the tremendously complex relationships that are involved in adopting or even considering "good" suggestions for the reform of American education.

The final set of Excellence Commission recommendations, those concerning leadership and fiscal support, are so in consonance with what most SEAs have been saying all along that few significant policy issues emerge: the importance of local leadership, the primacy of state educational responsibility and the reiteration of the signficant federal

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government roles and responsibilities--all of these jibe almost exactly with currently-accepted SEA policy.

B. Twentieth Century Fund Task Force

This report is directly and almost exclusively concerned with federal elementary and secondary education policy; only incidentally and by implication, therefore, does it address state educational policy issues. Nevertheless, some of the federal emphases and initiatives suggested do have direct bearing on state policy. For example, in addition to calling on the executive and legislative branches to "reiterate and emphasize" the importance of "better schools and better education" as "pressing national needs," the report calls specifically for a federally-funded Master Teachers Program "to recognize and reward excellence in the classroom." Proposed are five-year monetary awards of an unspecified amount on top of existing salaries, to go to teachers in every state, with the politically-interesting provision that there be one or more recipients from every congressional district! Endorsement of this proposal might well place the SEA in the somewhat dubious position of supporting an elite group of federally-subsidized (and perhaps federally-selected) teachers with little state voice in the whole matter.

A companion proposal in this report calls for "forgiveable" federal loans for prospective teachers of mathematics, science, and foreign language, a program so similar to the old NDEA that it would probably present no policy problems for state education authorities.

A more controversial proposal of this task force would involve very directly state education policy: the very strong assertion that literacy in English is the most important objective of elementary and secondary education in the United States, and that federal funds now allocated to

bilingual education be used to teach non-English-speaking children how to speak, read, and write English. State support for such a proposal, whether or not socially and pedagogically sound, might well be in conflict with existing state educational policy, and would in any case involve some potentially severe political-support problems with linguistic minority groups.

One of the most novel suggestions in the entire report comes at the conclusion of an almost impassioned plea for the federal government to fund fully categorical, target programs for the poor, the handicapped, and immigrant children, including illegal aliens. In addition to providing for these groups, the report recommends special federal funding for students who for any reason fail to achieve at levels commensurate with their abilities. So that these students won't be "abandoned to social promotion or repeated retention," the report requests that special federal fellowships be established for these students, to be awarded to local districts to set up "miniature academics" to address the students' specialized instructional needs. SEA assessment of this proposal would certainly involve serious policy issues of federal-state-local relationships, direct federal monitoring of another type of program, a new form of local school organization, and the danger of an unintended isolation of a certain group of students.

C. College Board Educational EQuality Project

Although this is one of the current reform-of-education reports that has--quite deservedly--received a good deal of publicity, it really does not fall into quite the same category as do other reports calling for the revitalization of the school system. First of all, the part of the study which has been completed and published, Academic Preparation for College,

addresses itself to that specific topic: what are the "preferred patterns of preparation" calculated to prepare a student for the successful pursuit of a college education? Furthermore, this is just the first report to be produced as the result of a long-range (10-year) study. Thus, there has not yet been an opportunity to give thorough attention to the relation between quality and equality.

Even at this early stage, however, it is fairly clear that the College Board project and its first report have implications for state educational policy. For example, the severe demands that this report would place upon high schools and their students have served to sharpen a distinction, which has sometimes appeared to be blurred, between appropriate standards for high school graduation and equally appropriate, but quite different, standards for college and university entrance. State education policy may again need to clarify tha distinction.

Further, it will likely come to the attention of state education policy makers that the emphasis this report properly gives to preparation for the college-bound may have the effect of making all programs at the secondary school level college-preparatory, to the grave disadvantage of the non-college-bound student. Moreoever, the report seems to avoid, at least for the moment, that gnawing question implied by the typography of the title, EQuality project: with such a push for academic, college-level quality, can equal access and equal valuing of all students, regardless of background and ability, really be maintained in our secondary schools?

In a very real sense, this report brings us face-to-face with an ultimately political policy question: how can the allocation and reallocation of the power and resources of the American school system be

so handled that--while no group or interest gets all of what it wants--the needs and desires of each group can be sufficiently accommodated, through consensus and compromise, that the educational system can still enjoy the necessary fiscal and psychological support to enable it to survive and even prosper? Answering that question may be the policy issue posed by this and the other "reform" reports.

D. Education Commission of the States Task Force on Education for Economic Growth

This report is another somewhat specialized analysis of the need for restructuring American education, since it addresses the problem from the standpoint of the demands that a changing, increasingly globalized economy is making upon our educational system. It is perhaps because of this specialized economic focus that the report does not give specific attention to the details of the schooling process; rather, the aim of the report is to give expression to broad policy goals calculated to make the educational system better able to support national economic growth.

The direct policy implications of this report for SEAs are therefore, quite limited, since the report does not call for specific actions on the part of the state educational authorities. It would be difficlt to conceive of an SEA which could not readily endorse such commission recommendations as these: formulating state plans for improving education; expressing a new and higher regard for teachers; making the academic experience more intense and more productive; creating broader and more effective partnerships with business and industry; improving the management of instruction in the schools; and similar worthwhile, but scarcely novel, suggestions.

To suggest that this report does not have clear-cut policy implications for SEAs is in no way to denigrate the work of the commission, or tc suggest any inadequacy or inappropriateness in its conclusions. Rather, it would simply appear that SEAs have already included these ideas in their established educational policies, and will doubtless be reassured to find that a high-level commission is also on record as endorsing and promulgating these sound ideas.

E. The Carnegie Corporation, "Education Economic Progress"

This report is very similar to the ECS report briefly described above in its focus on the importance of education to America's national and international economic well-being. This report, however, concerns itself primarily with needed federal legislative action, suggesting that it must be a federal responsiblity to provide the funds for strengthening programs to improve mathematical and scientific literacy, with emphasis on foreign language, but not to the exclusion of the "full spectrum" of the humanities and social sciences. The special need for continued concern with talent development among minorities and women is also noted.

Since the report does not really call for any programmatic emphases which are not already widely endorsed and strongly supported by SEA policy, the fundamental policy decision at the state level would simply be one of the degree of support the state would give to extensive federal subsidy of the desired programs.

F. Goodlad's "A Study of Schooling"

The Goodlad study is included here not because it is one of the commission-type reports, but because it has appeared in preliminary form at the same time as a number of the other reports, and contains a number

of very specific suggestions for the "restructuring" of American education. The sort of suggestions that Goodlad makes fall clearly within the policy-decison arena in which state education agencies operate.

For example, a major Goodlad recommendation is that schooling should be accelerated by two years, with children starting formal education the month after they reach the age of 4 and graduating from high school at 16. Whatever the essential merits of this suggestion, it is clearly one which raises serious educational policy issues for SEAs. The fiscal implications, the political forces involved and the political consequences to be anticipated, the problems of coordinating school schedules with a new class entering school every month, the problem of what to do with 16-year-olds on the labor market--the baffling questions are numerous and the answers extremely elusive! But it is obvious that such a suggestion raises policy issues of extreme importance.

Some of the Goodlad suggestions, such as the return to a core of general education courses to be required of all students (similar to the "new basics" curriculum suggested in the "Excellence" report, or the "spine" curriculum in The Twentieth Century Fund report), fall so clearly within the intent of most present SEA policies of tightening up the secondary school curriculum as to require no policy shift.

Other of the Goodlad suggestions are as bold and far-reaching as the one for accelerating and shrinking the school year: sharply reducing the size of schools; renouncing any form of ability grouping; instituting a distinct higher-pay incentive for especially capable and highly-trained teachers--a plan that, whatever its form or intent, will also surely be attacked in some quarters as "merit pay."

Each of the suggestions which Goodlad makes has in it the potential for significant SEA policy revision and would require the most careful analysis of policy implications.

IN CONCLUSION

There is no good way to summarize any one of the reports briefly described in the preceeding pages, and certainly no way to summarize them as a whole. Certain generalizations about their policy implications can, however, be safely made.

First of all, the reform, redirection, restructuring--whatever it's called--of American education cannot be brought about quickly. No matter how insightful the analyses of the problems or how incisive the recommendations for improvement, we're still faced--as one prominent policy analyst recently pointed out--with two difficulties: "It's more complicated than we thought," he observed, and "It always depends."

Second, as another prominent educational reseacher recently commented, this whole array of "reform" reports seems to have been"...written in a fiscal vacuum." Costs of proposed reforms must be honestly assessed in terms of fiscal and political realities.

Third, the commendable enthusiasm for revival of emphasis on academic learnings of high cognitive content and rigorous intellectual depth must be balanced with equal concern for what is best for the individual. A Scottish author, writing in a recent issue of The Economist on the "basics" thrust in the schools of Scotland, observed shrewdly, "There is more real education in learning a skill you want than knowledge you do not."

And finally--and perhaps more optimistically--it might well be noted that the various reports and recommendations all have one thing in common: they strongly emphasize the importance of will and commitment on the part of those charged with education policy making and policy

implementation as key prerequisities for any educational reform. Clear articulation and demonstration of the determination to bring about improved schooling may well constitute the strongest and most effective contribution of SEAs, their Chiefs, and their Boards.